

COWBOY CHURCH

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The past couple of decades has seen significant growth in the cowboy church, with an estimated 750 in the United States. CowboyChurch.net, founded in 2001, is the largest directory of cowboy churches, the roots of the movement being traced back to ministries targeting rodeo events.

There is nothing wrong with meeting in a barn or having a friendly, relaxed atmosphere or welcoming people who need to come to church directly from work or wearing a bolo tie or baptizing in a stock tank or collecting the offering in a boot hanging at the back of the building.

If that were the essence of cowboy church, we would say nothing about it. But in researching this phenomenon, it appears that cowboy churches are big on cowboy and little on the whole counsel of God.

Though there are probably exceptions, they tend to promote a short Sunday service with a brief “message” and a lot of sensual, heavy-bass backbeat music. It’s the same sound heard at a Saturday night hoedown, where the liquor flows and you “grab your girl and do-si-do.” This is a cheap, fleshly, worldly music to offer as worship to a thrice holy God, and adding some words about “Jesus” doesn’t change the music’s fundamental sensual character and doesn’t convert it from being profane to being spiritual.

The non-denominational Wabash Valley Cowboy Church in Terre Haute, Indiana, has a Sunday “program that is 75 percent music, with a brief sermonette and no altar call.” The Ridin’ For the Brand Cowboy Church in Sanger, Texas, satisfies deep spiritual appetites with Andy Griffith and John Wayne Bible studies. Last Christmas, the “professional country-western musicians” at the cowboy church in Cortez, Colorado, told the congregation, “We’re gonna sing about Santa Claus tonight, hope you don’t mind that too much” (“Saddle Up,” *Cortez Journal*, Jan. 6, 2012). In January the Cortez cowboy church hosted a live comedy and Western music show.

I’m sure there are exceptions, but cowboy church seems to appeal to those looking for a bit of Christianity to salve their conscience, a type of church that won’t put obligations on them and interfere much with their chosen lifestyle. This is the “Jesus” that is still very popular in America. Typical is the local rancher who attends the cowboy church in Cortez, Colorado, who says, “I pray on a regular basis, but I’m no Bible thumper by any means.”

The doctrinal statements tend to be extremely brief, facilitating an unscriptural big tent approach to fellowship and association.

Some, like Cowboy Church Ministries, are charismatic.

The American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches is affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT). The BGCT, in turn, partners with the New Evangelical Southern Baptist Convention *and* with the theologically liberal Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, where Jimmy Carter, who denies the infallible inspiration of Scripture and believes that men can be saved apart from believing in Christ, has found a home.

It is obvious that most cowboy churches are outlaws when it comes to not conforming to the world, to contending earnestly for the faith, and to obeying the doctrine of biblical separation.

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